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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of reflecting teams as a tool for assisting students who are engaged in internship placements in community counseling settings. These placements are used to help students develop the skills of counseling and the professional identity of a counselor. Counselor educators are involved in the role of supportive co-participants with both the counseling students and the clients. From this position, educators can add to the work done by counseling students rather than critiquing it. The model for the Reflecting Team Process is patterned after the M. White (1996) model. Guidelines for using the model are included. There are several advantages to using this model. It allows students to be involved in counseling situations early in their education; it promotes conversations and relations based on the sharing of ideas; it helps stimulate ideas and creative solutions; and it provides opportunities for students to receive feedback concerning their questions. Students use videotape recordings of their work with clients to share in seminar sessions. Class members provide feedback that the counselor can take back to the client. Such activities enrich the counseling process as well as add to the counselor's resourcefulness. (JDM)

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The Use Of Reflecting Teams In Counselor Education And Supervision

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ED 447 377

For some years with our colleagues at the University of Waikato (Gerald is now director of School Counseling at San Diego State University) we have explored the use of reflecting teams as a tool for assisting students to develop the skills of counseling and the professional identity of counselor.

A Description Of The Reflecting Team

It was from Tom Andersen's (1991) work that the concept of the reflecting team entered the field of family therapy. Our interest in the work of narrative therapist Michael White (1994) meant that we encountered his developments of the practice.

In short, the reflecting team grew from the family therapy practice associated with the Milan group (White, 1995) of having a team of therapists, some of whom were positioned behind a one way screen while another member of the team in front of the screen asked questions of the family members. As therapists using this practice became interested in how the interviewer became part of the systemic perspective that formed around the problem issue, they began to question to privileged position of the observers. They also came to see that the ideas that the observers might have about the therapeutic conversation might be of use not just to the interviewing therapist but also to the family members.

Therefore Tom Andersen and his colleagues began in the late 1980s to experiment with a break in the interview in which the roles were reversed and the observers became the observed. The team of listeners is not allowed to remain hidden behind the screen looking in on other people's lives. Rather, the reflecting team switches places with the 'client' and the counselor, so that client and counselor can listen in and observe them from behind the screen as the reflecting team talks about their observations on the session. The family members and the interviewer are thus invited into the position of more distant listening as they overheard the reflecting team speak and are free to choose what to make meaning of from the reflecting team's comments.

Michael White in his explanation of the value of the reflecting team process refers to Barbara Myerhoff's anthropological comments on the value of the "outsider-witness" role in "definitional ceremonies" (White, 1995: 178; 1997: 94; 1999:74). The outsider witness in a public ceremony lends a greater authority to new developments in a person's

CG 30476

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life through their acknowledgment of such developments. Claims to new status are authenticated and authorised by such processes of definitional ceremony. Reflecting teams can be small scale audiences for the acknowledgement of the developments that take place in a counseling process and as such can help to add to the significance of what is said in a counseling conversation.

In counselor education we have used the reflecting team process from relatively early on in students' learning about counseling in small group counselling skills training. In a group of four or five with an instructor, the roles of counsellor and client are rotated around the group and on each occasion the rest of the group (including the instructor) is invited into the role of reflecting team. Their job is to assist the counsellor to expand on the interview by offering personal responses to the client's sharing of personal struggles and asking further questions to help elaborate the work being done by the counsellor in the interview. In this way the reflecting team members are not neutral observers of what happens in the counseling. They need to be listening with the same ear as the counselor, always seeking aspects of the client's story to bring forth more fully, rather than in any position of judgement or of expert interpretation.

We have also used the reflecting team process with counseling students who are engaged in internship placements in community counseling contexts. When the students come together as a class, we conduct supervision conversations with each student in turn and the rest of the small group they are working with function as a reflecting team. The aim of these conversations is to story the developments that are taking place in their work as they overcome challenges and develop competencies in their counseling work. Other students in the reflecting team are positioned as listeners with an interest in fostering such development in their classmates.

The Reflecting Team Process

White (1996) and Andersen (1990) provide models of reflecting team practice that we employ. White's four-stage reflecting team process is one that we find particularly useful for training purposes. The four stages of the reflecting team process that we use include:

Stage One

The process begins with a conventional counseling interview between two members of a counseling class. One acts as the counselor and the other is in the role of the client. During this interview other members of the group, including the faculty member present, become the reflecting team - that is, a team of listeners observing the interview (they may be behind a one-way mirror if there is one available).

Stage Two

The reflecting team members trade places with the counselor and the client. The counselor and the client now become the observers listening in to the conversation of the reflecting team. The reflecting team discuss the impact of what they have heard on themselves, and reflect on other possible meanings or discursive influences, express curiosity about things they would like to know more about and wonder about other possible paths for development.

Stage Three

The reflecting team goes back behind the mirror and the client and counselor return for a follow-up interview. The counselor then interviews the client about the meaning to her or him of what the reflecting team has said.

Stage Four

The reflecting team and the counselor and client all join in the same room and debrief the the process. Debriefing may include expressing curiosity about the counselor's thinking or behavior and asking questions of the client about the effects of the counselor's responses This is the opportunity for students to ask questions about the specifics of the counselling interview and of the reflecting team comments. It is a place where teaching can happen and learning take place about the process through reflection on what has happened. However the teaching is not all done by the class instructor because students learn from each other's questions, thoughts and comments.

Guidelines for reflecting teams

Reflecting team members should not to set themselves up as objective observers or expert commentators on the work of either the counselor or the client. Instead they should concentrate on:

- joining with the client and locating themselves with the client so that their comments do not appear to come from a place of abstraction (White, 1995).
- sharing personal responses to what the client has said (e.g.: I was quite moved by the courage X [the client] was showing in standing up against these problems.) (White, 1995)
- interviewing each other about these responses in order to situate these responses as part of a personal perspective rather than as an expert pronouncement (e.g.: So what do you think made those expressions of courage stand out so much for you and seem so moving?) (White, 1995)

- avoid speaking directly to the client in order not to deprive them of the opportunity of being in the listening position (Andersen, 1991; White 1995).
- avoid speaking to each other while behind the screen so that their conversation is not rehearsed when they speak in the reflecting team (Andersen, 1991).
- speak tentatively and speculatively about possible meanings that may not have been explored in the interview. (Andersen, 1991)
- ask questions about possible openings to new meanings. These should be "unusual but not too unusual" (Andersen, 1991)
- expressing curiosity about things that were not explored by the counselor in a way that opens up the dominant discourses shaping the client's problems to further deconstructive scrutiny (e.g.: I was wondering about how all the cultural expectations that influence mothers might have been making it difficult for X to respond any differently to her son in that situation.) (White, 1995)
- avoid sitting in judgment about the lives of others and avoid employing language that derives from systems of normalising judgment (White, 1999).
- wondering about the significance of other possible avenues to explore in the development of alternative stories (e.g.: I wonder if there would be anyone in X's life who would not be surprised to see her struggling to overcome these problems, someone who has known about her courage all along perhaps.) (White, 1995)
- wondering about the mystery of unique outcomes and exceptions as openings to alternative stories (White, 1995).
- in the fourth stage mentioned above avoid starting up the counseling interview again (White, 1995).

Advantages of using reflecting teams

Use of reflecting teams in this manner has many advantages. Some of the advantages that we have found were alluded to by Davidson and Lussardi (1991).

1. Using reflecting teams means less time "teaching" and more time for students to practise and learn from the process (Davidson and Lussardi, 1991: 144).
2. Being involved in a reflecting team gives beginning counselors a chance to be involved in a counseling situation from early in their development, even before they are ready to take on the role of counselor as interviewer (Davidson and Lussardi, 1991: 147).
3. The use of the reflecting teams helps to equalise relations between team members and instructors. It promotes conversations and relations based on mutual sharing of ideas

and lessens the tendency for the trainer to be regarded as the "expert" (Davidson and Lussardi, 1991: 147, 148).

4. If the beginning counselor does run out of ideas and get stuck, s/he has the luxury of having the reflecting team to stimulate fresh ideas and then the chance to restart the interview from a new place after the reflecting team has made their contribution (Davidson and Lussardi, 1991: 147).

5. In the reflecting team role more than in an observer role student counselors get to practice speaking about their impressions in respectful ways in front of people rather than in objectifying or disrespectful ways behind people's backs. In the process, more genuinely respectful ways of speaking about clients are rehearsed (Davidson and Lussardi, 1991: 148).

6. The model provides ample opportunity for students to receive feedback about which of their questions and responses were helpful and which were not (Davidson and Lussardi, 1991: 148).

7. Chiefly, everyone participating removes themselves from the typically modernist role of "neutral observer" of the counselor. Being 'observed' can be counterproductive to the counselor's development of confidence and competence, because it invites counselors to view themselves from the outside. Such an external view brings into play the internalized products of the "gaze" (Foucault, 1977), such as self-doubt or feelings of inadequacy. We interpret Foucault's ideas about gaze to refer to the proliferation of processes of 'normalizing measurement' in modern society, against which we are frequently invited to assess ourselves, often because we are in fact being assessed, or at least imagine ourselves being assessed, by others in authority. The effect is an internalized social control mechanism that renders people docile by undermining their sense of their potency as they defer to normalizing measurement. Objectivity can be, in this analysis, an enemy of the expression of personal agency. We seek to avoid this kind of personal undermining by avoiding the use of neutral observers who comment from positions of disembodied objectivity.

8. Instead of the role of neutral observer, both counselors and counselor educators are recruited by the reflecting team process into role of supportive co-participants with both the counselor and the client. From this position they can add to the work done by the counselor (and to the story of this work), rather than critiquing it. To add in this way, the reflecting team has to be 'thinking themselves' into the position (and the identity) of "counselor" all the time. For all involved, we find this process to be more productive than taking on an observer role.

9. We also use reflecting teams to supervise the work done by students in the community. In this process, a faculty member interviews a student in each class meeting about some aspect of their professional practice. Then other students act as a reflecting team for this

conversation, concentrating on "appreciative elaboration" of this aspect of identity development. In other words, the reflecting team expresses interest in the developments the student is making in his or her work, and uses questions as opportunities to explore these developments further. The reflecting team again avoids objective evaluation. In the process, plot developments in a counselor's professional identity are co-authored.

At times, such conversations might begin with a focus on a problematic element in such a story. For example, students might discuss the influence of self-doubt or confusion on their work. Or they might map out confidence-sapping turns of events. They might externalize and give expression the "voice of self-criticism" as separate from the person whom it has been maligning, and might deconstruct (unpack) its "thin" conclusions (White, 1998) about a student's abilities. This process of externalizing the problem gives voice to a linguistic device (often an extended metaphor) in which the problem is granted an existence of its own, even a personality, quite distinct from the person. The person is cast as the victim of the problem's malevolent designs, before being asked if they want to take up a position of agency and protest against these designs. In line with this narrative practice of externalizing conversation, the students work to separate themselves from the storyline that produces such problematic stories and to enter more fully into a counterplot which features preferred themes, like competence, acknowledgement, and appreciation. They then connect these themes with storylines that embody them in action. To this end, the reflecting team process works to mine moments of achievement and provide acknowledgement for these by storying them in exquisite detail. In this way the reflecting team constructs a richer or "thicker" description (White, 1998) of a student's work, one which features further entry into a preferred professional identity (that is, one that is preferred by the students themselves rather than prescribed by the teaching faculty).

10. Similarly, when students bring video recordings of their work with clients to share in seminar sessions, we seek to find ways to get the whole class to respond from the position of (identity of) the counselor. To this end, the class might make a recording of their reflecting team discussion about the counseling interview, which the counselor can then take back and show to the client. Or each member of the class might write a letter to the client for the counselor to take to the next counseling meeting. Such activities enrich the counseling process as well as add to the counselor's resourcefulness. In a sense, the counselor takes back into the counseling room the appreciation and support of her colleagues in class. But there is also a sense that the class members take forward into their professional development an involvement in this counseling relationship.

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